

# FEMA report strikes blow

By MARK MORROW  
Staff Writer

MOUNT VERNON — The feds sent in the verdict yesterday — Gages Slough is part of a floodway and should be protected from future development.

It means "no houses, no fills, no mobile homes, no anything" for certain areas, a federal official said last night.

Larry Basich, hydraulics engineer for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, delivered the news last night at a meeting of the Skagit Council of Governments. Local officials were told to keep Gages Slough clear of encroachments — or expect to see FEMA put the knife to any future hopes of federal flood insurance.

The three areas Basich described as part of the floodway are the Skagit River itself, the area immediately in and around Gages Slough, and the area immediately north of Burlington Hill.

Floodway restrictions should be in effect from the south end of Burlington's urban area all the way to the Skagit River, Basich said.

"We will expect the local government to keep those areas completely free of any encroachment," Basich said. "This is the final analysis. The decision was made today."

Basich said he got the word Thursday morning from his superiors in Washington, D.C.

He also said federal officials will try to work very closely with Skagit County and the cities of Burlington and Mount Vernon in defining the areas for future development.

"We would not expect the city of Burlington to build a road from the city to the levee. We certainly wouldn't expect that," Basich said.

An official report will be out within a month, and the feds will then hold a public meeting to explain the situation. Following a 90-day appeal period, the locals will have six months to adopt an ordinance in line with FEMA's Skagit River Study findings — or find themselves ineligible for federal flood insurance.

"We're gonna get mad and kick you out of the program," Basich warned.

## to proposed mall

Reminding local officials they didn't like the results of an earlier study released in March, Basich said the feds were now "at the last stage."

"We won't do anything else," he warned.

The locals don't have to do anything, but "you might not get highways or any more sewage treatment plants. I wouldn't bet on that, but it could happen," Basich said.

People already living in such a floodway could rebuild their own homes in the event of fire — but additions to those homes would be restricted, Basich said.

While Basich did not say the floodway designation would necessarily kill the proposed Cascade Mall in Burlington, he let it be known it was FEMA's position to "discourage unwise development."

"If federal funds were involved (in building the mall), we'd do our best to stop it," Basich said. "We've found in our studies that a lot of water goes through that slough. Not only does it (the mall) constitute a development — it promotes

development. A small city could build up around it. I don't think it was the most practical place to put that mall."

Developers of the mall are free to go after the necessary building permits, Basich said, but the actual start of construction is the key date. The mall might still be stopped if builders take more than a year to bring in the first load of cement, since it could take a full year for a flood ordinance to be adopted. Developers have said they plan to start building the mall in the summer of 1984.

SCOG members asked whether Basich had delivered the news to the realtors yet, but Sedro-Woolley Mayor Spud Walley answered for him.

"I don't think so," Walley chuckled.

Other members of SCOG showed little reaction to the news. Burlington City Supervisor Stan Kersey, seated in the audience, said he wouldn't want to make any comments "in front of the ladies" in the room.

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mall plans

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"I've got to see it in closer detail before I get into an argument," Kersey said.

Nookachamps farmer and flood fighter Larry Kunzler was elated. He called it a "vindication" of all his efforts with Gages Slough and the floodway issue.

"FEMA didn't say anything here tonight that Skagit County history hasn't said for the past 83 years. Gages Slough is a floodway. It's about time the local governments accepted that," Kunzler said.

"It's not because I wanted it a floodway, or FEMA wanted it a floodway," he said. "God wanted it a floodway."

"A lot of people made a bad investment."

Basich said lack of funds prevented the feds from doing a complete map showing the boundaries of the floodway. Such a study could have cost \$400,000, he said.

He also said a permanent designation of all of the Skagit River flood plain west of Interstate 5 as farmland would be an "excellent idea."

Flood studies and stricter regulations on flood insurance began in 1968 when the federal officials decided they were losing too much money each year to flood damage, Basich said.